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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004318

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SUBJECT: BAGHDAD INDEPENDENT LOCAL POLITICIANS DISCUSS
FOUNDING NEW CENTRIST POLITICAL PARTY

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Joseph Gregoire for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Independent members from eight of Baghdad's nine District Advisory Councils (DACs) told Baghdad Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) members they are considering establishing a new liberal political party during a roundtable discussion hosted by PRT Baghdad on November 16.

The PRT held the event at the request of four participants leading the effort to form the new party, which they are calling the "Liberanians." According to group members, the new party would advocate a secular government and equal rights for women, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Jews, Arabs, Kurds and Turkomen. They described the movement as a needed alternative to the religious and ethnic parties that now control all levels of government. They also asked for Coalition support. Although the group is small and lacks influence over much of Baghdad's highly sectarian electorate, the members claim they can build support and their efforts bear watching. The PRT committed to help the group with information on, as well as access to, various USG programs in support of political parties and democratic development. END SUMMARY.

"We Find Our Voices Unheard"

12. (C) PRT Baghdad's Governance section hosted a roundtable discussion November 16 for nine independent DAC members, at the request of four of the participants, to discuss what they called the need for a "unified liberal voice in Iraq." The four initiators were Sheikh Muhammed Bakr, the head of the powerful Tamimi tribe and Deputy Chairman of the Kadhimiyah DAC; Karim Al Jaaf, a Kurd from the Karkh DAC; Omar Al Rhamami of the Adhamiya DAC; and Adnan Hassan Alarraji of the defunct Baghdad City Council and the Rusafa DAC. They brought in a group of five similarly-minded liberal local leaders including Shatha H. Al-Aobeidi of the Karkh DAC and the Governor's office, who is one of the leading female politicians in Baghdad; Muhammed J. Al-Rubeiy, Chairman of the Karadah DAC; Walid Taha, a wealthy Iraqi businessman and a potential backer; and Dr. Khaled Bashir Marza of the Karadah DAC. The group was comprised of one woman and eight men from each of Iraq's major communities: Shi'a, Sunni, Christian, Arab, Kurd and Turkomen.

13. (C) All the members pointed to what they called the dominance and failure of the SCIRI/Badr political party in the Baghdad Provincial Council (PC), as well as in the offices of Governor and Mayor. Ms. Shatha al-Aobeidi asserted that the PC is made up of "Shi'a only and from one area and one radical party." (NOTE: 49 OF THE 51 Baghdad PC members are Shi'a. END NOTE.) She emphasized that, as a

Sunni, she has "no problem with the Shi'a people, but with the religious parties that do not represent the thinking of Baghdad's people. We who are liberals find our voices unheard amidst the other groups." Several attendees mentioned that the various political conferences being held in Iraq are being attended only by the representatives of political parties in government, and they present only the views of those parties. Shatha charged that "even the 25 women in the Council of Representatives don't have the voice to express the thoughts of the women and children of Iraq."

More Work to Do...

14. (C) The group members all agreed on the need for a new, liberal and independent political party in Baghdad, but the group also recognized that they still have to define their goals and principles in order to move forward. Karim Al Jaaf and Dr. Khaled took the lead in calling for the group to come together to agree on specific points of a political platform. (Comment. The nascent "Liberanian" party is driven by an agreed need and desire for an alternative bloc, but the group has not discussed their positions on specific issues or decided what actions they should take. End comment.) They have started discussing the need for a media strategy to build support in the community, but the PRT,s CAO cautioned them to spend time formulating the principles and message they would like to send out before devising the actual media strategy. The leaders, who acknowledged that forming a new political party would be an uphill battle, agreed to meet again with the help of the PRT to discuss a specific platform.

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15. (C) In a surprising turn of events, one of the attendees, Muhammed J. Al-Rubeiy, Chairman of the Karadah DAC and a frequent contact of the PRT, indicated to the PRT,s Political Officer following the meeting that he was not interested in participating further in the group,s activities despite his desire to see a secular and liberal Baghdad. At about the same time, other attendees stated to PRT officers that Al-Rubeiy is "too radical" and thus would not be welcome at any future sessions.

A Plea for U.S. Assistance

16. (C) Adnan Hassan and Sheikh Muhammed Bakr took the lead in arguing that any such independent effort to form a party would require substantial assistance from the United States. They asked for Coalition support to leverage their small numbers and reach a balance with the religious parties that have their own external financial backers and can "use the mosques to reach out to their supporters five times a day." Adnan Hassan expressed his belief that assistance from the U.S. would need to go beyond simply "moral" support. Sheikh Muhammad asserted that the independent community leaders need financial support as well as technical and programmatic support if their potential endeavor is to be successful. They agreed on the need to establish firm goals and principles and present more specific requests of support. The PRT promised to provide a list of U.S.-sponsored training programs available as well as information on international visitor programs.

Comment

17. (C) The core group of four "Liberanians" and the other secular-minded attendees are all well-known figures in their respective communities. The would-be party leader, Sheikh Muhammed Bakr, is the head of the Tamimi tribe, which is one

of the largest in Iraq and stretches to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The Liberanians claim to have fellow-travelers throughout Iraq, though they were vague when asked for numbers. The group recognizes that forming a competitive party would be a challenge and that it would take at least a year to build a base of support that could carry them to elected office. They agreed on the need to work together as a bloc in the near term, if not as an established political party, in order to best serve their communities and counter the extremist religious parties that run the city and province of Baghdad. This meeting was a first step for them to come together and discuss a possible way forward to counter the ethnic and sectarian divisions throughout Baghdad. The PRT has scheduled follow-up meetings with the group and expects to receive a detailed platform and more defined goals from its members.

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